



U.S. Agency for
International
Development

Bureau for
Global Health

COUNTRY PROFILE

HIV/AIDS

EL SALVADOR

Since AIDS was first identified in El Salvador 1984, the epidemic has grown steadily, especially in urban areas. More cases have been reported since January 1999 than in all previous years. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) currently estimates that by the end of 2003, 29,000 adults and children were living with HIV/AIDS, yielding an adult prevalence of 0.7 percent. The HIV/AIDS National Program estimates that the 35 percent of reported AIDS cases occur in the 25-to-34 age group and the male-to-female ratio is approximately 1.9:1.

Estimated Number of Adults and Children Living with HIV/AIDS (end 2003)	29,000 (Range 14,000–50,000)
Total Population (2004)	6,614,000
Adult HIV Prevalence (end 2003)	0.7%
HIV-1 Seroprevalence in Urban Areas	
Population at High Risk (i.e., sex workers and clients, patients seeking treatment for sexually transmitted infections, or others with known risk factors)	4.0%
Population at Low Risk (i.e., pregnant women, blood donors, or others with no known risk factors)	0.3%

Sources: UNAIDS, U.S. Census Bureau

According to the national program, 84 percent of the cases were sexually transmitted, with 76 percent of cases transmitted heterosexually, 4 percent between homosexuals, and 3 percent between bisexuals. The country's high male-to-female ratio and cultural stigma suggest that transmission between men who have sex with men may be underreported. The results of a recent multi-center study of men who have sex with men indicated that 62 percent started their sexual life before the age of 15, and in more than half the cases, with other males. In addition, a high percentage of the men who have sex with men surveyed acknowledged sexual relationships with women and most did not have a stable partner.

El Salvador is considered to have a concentrated epidemic, with prevalence consistently exceeding 5 percent in one or more vulnerable populations: commercial sex workers, in some cases, as high as 10 percent; tuberculosis patients, 3 percent; sexually transmitted infection patients, 5 percent; and surgical patients, 7 percent. A 1996–97 study of street children showed an infection rate of more than 20 percent, and new data suggest the HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men is as high as 17.8 percent.

Sentinel surveillance data in the 1990s found low prevalence among groups such as pregnant women and blood donors (ranging from 0 to 2.6 percent in various locations around the country). The most recent data from 2003 indicated a prevalence of 0.3 percent among pregnant women. Prevalence among women in the general population was slightly higher, but generally still under 1 percent.



Map of El Salvador: PCL Map Collection, University of Texas

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NATIONAL RESPONSE

Although the government began initial HIV/AIDS prevention activities as early as 1988, a great deal of stigma surrounding HIV persists in El Salvador.

The epidemic remains largely hidden and too often is associated with inevitable death, homosexuality, and punishment for immoral behavior. El Salvador was the last country in the region to pass legislation protecting patient rights and guaranteeing access to treatment (law number 588, passed 2001). The law originally included a provision to allow compulsory testing of employees, but that provision was removed before passage.

El Salvador's National AIDS Program, established in 1989, works in close relationship with various ministries and civil society. The country has a multisectoral national AIDS coordination mechanism that is highly active. There is some donor support, as well as evidence of commitment from high-level authorities and the private sector. El Salvador was approved for funding from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in the second round.

In January 2002, the Ministry of Health began to offer antiretroviral treatment. Like other Central American countries, El Salvador makes no distinction between the insured and the uninsured in terms of access to care. In cooperation with other countries in the region, the Salvadoran government negotiated price reductions in antiretroviral drugs with major pharmaceutical manufacturers, and, by late 2002, some 650 people were receiving treatment. The provision of treatment is currently concentrated in the capital city of San Salvador and is provided almost exclusively at the tertiary level, one of several issues at the heart of El Salvador's ongoing health system reforms.

Other issues to be addressed include decentralization of health services; the development of an integrated HIV/AIDS response with public, private, and nongovernmental organization participation; the need for more programs to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission; and better integration of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment with other health programs, such as those for maternal and child health, tuberculosis control, and sexually transmitted infections.

USAID SUPPORT

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Mission to El Salvador has incorporated HIV/AIDS activities into its broader health program, which focuses primarily on the health of women, youth, and children. In Fiscal Year 2003, the USAID allocated \$500,000 toward combating HIV/AIDS in El Salvador. USAID-financed technical assistance to the El Salvador's Ministry of Health will expand voluntary counseling and testing to target members of specific high prevalence groups, as well as to pregnant women. In addition, technical assistance to nongovernmental organizations will help prevent and control HIV/AIDS in at-risk groups. USAID continues to play a lead role as a member of El Salvador's Country Coordinating Mechanism for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

The bulk of USAID's effort in El Salvador, however, is not in its country HIV/AIDS program but in its Central American regional HIV/AIDS program, which provides support to seven Central American countries. Established in the mid-1990s, the regional strategy focuses on areas and at-risk groups not normally covered by bilateral programs. USAID allocated \$4.9 million for regional HIV/AIDS activities in FY 2003; some of these funds were used to support activities in El Salvador. The regional HIV/AIDS program works to improve the political environment by strengthening policy formulation through sound research and information dissemination. The program supports activities to strengthen the capacity of Central American organizations to deliver HIV/AIDS services and information to target groups and has developed a condom social marketing strategy which aims to reduce risky behavior in target populations.

Specific USAID-funded activities in El Salvador include:

Behavior Change Communication

The Mission supports behavior change activities to reduce and prevent the transmission of HIV among the National Civil Police, the National Academy for Public Service, their family members and associates, and key segments within the communities they serve.

Project activities include:

- Formative research related to HIV/AIDS and behavior change
- Training of educators and counselors to conduct interactive educational sessions in the clinics that provide services to the national organizations
- Formation of a peer network composed of individuals in these organizations to encourage behavior change among their colleagues, friends, and families to reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS, to provide referrals to related services (such as counseling and testing), and to distribute condoms

USAID also works with the Pan American Social Marketing Organization to scale up behavior change activities with high-prevalence populations like men who have sex with men and commercial sex workers.

Capacity Building

USAID/El Salvador provides technical assistance in the following areas:

- Development of the national HIV/AIDS program
- Development of the HIV/AIDS treatment protocols and sexually transmitted infection norms
- Training for public and private sector health personnel in HIV/AIDS counseling, sexually transmitted infection management, and management of pediatric HIV/AIDS patients
- Capacity building among El Salvadoran nongovernmental organizations to create a more sustainable and systematic approach to behavior change
- Establishment of an HIV/AIDS information hotline

Voluntary Counseling and Testing among Pregnant Women

USAID/El Salvador supported a baseline study of the knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to voluntary counseling and testing among pregnant women, their partners, and relatives. Results of the study were presented at El Salvador's first national forum on prevention of mother-to-child transmission. The study results will be used to develop messages for a mass media campaign promoting voluntary counseling and testing among pregnant women. Other Mission activities include the development of a voluntary counseling and testing protocol, and health worker training.

IMPORTANT LINKS AND CONTACTS

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USAID HIV/AIDS Website, El Salvador
http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/aids/Countries/lac/elsalvador.html

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*For more information,
see http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/aids or <http://www.synergyaids.com>.*

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